

Chalkboard

By

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Long time school personnel who hold 12-month contracts of employment are blessed with having two “New Year’s Day” celebrations within a 12-month period. One, of course, is celebrated on January 1 with the rest of society. The other is July 1, which is the beginning of a new fiscal year. We school types may actually have three New Year’s Days as the first day that students return, regardless of calendar date, also signifies a new beginning.

New beginnings are nice whenever they occur. There is a sense of having a clean slate unmarred by human frailty. There is always the awe and wonder at the prospect of remembering and utilizing past learnings to create a better today and a better tomorrow.

For just a moment think of the first new beginning in your life. You were born. You had no personal choice in that matter. You did not get to choose your parents, to choose their race, to choose their social or financial status, or to choose their personality. You had no choice regarding their level of education or the job either, both, or neither had.

You had no choice in how you were raised in the first years of your life. Living in the lap of luxury, the pit of despair, or whatever point in between was not your call. Whether you were held and snuggled or slapped and cursed was not your choice to make.

For that matter you had no choice about the body with which you were born. Short or tall, big or little, smart or not so smart, fair of face or “Plain Jane” were pre-programmed in your DNA. Endomorph? Extrovert? No choice.

When it came time to enroll in school you had no choice in the matter. You had no choice in the clothes you would wear, no choice in the teacher to which you were assigned, no choice in the quality of instruction, no choice in the environment of the classroom, no choice in the food served in the lunch room, no choice of the age bus you rode, no choice in the equipment on the play ground, and not even any choice in who you would sit by in the classroom.

Others controlled everything in the early years of your life. Whether those in control did “good” or “bad” in that oversight of your life may be the elusive type question that defies a definitive answer. Yet a degree in

psychology or sociology is not required to accept that circumstances and happenings from birth to the early school years sets a course for a life that may take a lifetime to alter.

I think that no one would argue that every small child should be sheltered from the hurt and pain that life sometimes offers in many different ways. No one would want a child to go to bed hungry or cold. No one wants a child living in abuse or degradation. No child should be exposed to filth in whatever form it would take.

Yet there is much truth in whoever said, “We are all indeed born equal but that changes immediately when the first breath is drawn.” To wax redundant, the child has no choice in those things that segregates him or her to or from others.

Surely God Himself as part of His eternal purpose ordained a “free and appropriate” public education. If not, then surely it must have spawned from His servants, consciously or unconsciously. I say that because obtaining an education offers all children a chance to have a choice in their future. Having a choice is always a good thing.

I believe that very concept is the crux of the *Lakeview* issue. If education is the great equalizer of men, then every child should have an opportunity to receive the best education possible regardless of whatever circumstances to which they are born. City of residence, status of the child’s family or community, and personal qualifiers of the child should not affect the opportunity to learn. The things, which a child has no control over, should not be major players in determining the quality of education a child receives in public education.

Understand, agree or not, that education of the child is mandated by the Arkansas Constitution to be a responsibility of the State of Arkansas. Delegating this responsibility to local school districts or allowing parents to seek other educational paths such as private school or home school does not absolve the state from its responsibility. The Arkansas Supreme Court has said that our present educational system is inadequate and inequitable and has directed the state to fix it. While it is not so stated in their lengthy opinion, the judicial system has affirmed that things, which a child has no control over, shall not determine the quality of the education the child receives.

Thus, with the beginning of this new year, comes the promise of educational reform in Arkansas. What form will it take? Consolidation of school districts? Elementary and secondary school districts as separate entities? Regional high schools? More taxes?

Since I credited God, as the originator of what is ultimately good and true, I had best note that in educational reform the “devil will always be in the details”.